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Sexuality education in Finland; current perspectives and challenges

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Tämä kandidaatintutkielma käsittelee seksuaalikasvatusta Suomessa, ajankohtaisia seksuaalikasvatuksen osa-alueita sekä niiden tuomia haasteita.

Terveystieto sekä sen osa-alueena seksuaalikasvatus ovat tärkeitä oppiaineita, sillä niiden tavoitteena on tarjota oppilaille tiedot ja taidot huolehtia paitsi omasta terveydestään, myös toimia yhteiskunnassa muita kunnioittaen. Seksuaalikasvatus on osa Suomen perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelmaa, tavoittaen koko oppivelvollisen väestön. Seksuaalikasvatusta opetetaan eri luokilla eri aineisiin integroituna, luokka-asteesta riippuen.

Tässä kandidaatintutkielmassa esitellään Suomen seksuaalikasvatuksen kehittymisen vaiheita, sekä sitä, kuinka seksuaalikasvatusta toteutetaan Suomessa. Tässä kirjallisuuskatsauksessa käsitellään myös ajankohtaisia seksuaalisuuteen liittyviä aiheita (sukupuoleen liittyvät kysymykset, seksuaalisuuden monimuotoisuus, lisääntyvä kulttuurien moninaisuus, seksuaalinen häirintä, sekä yhteiskunnan seksualisoituminen), ja tarkastellaan niiden myötä mahdollisesti aiheutuvia haasteita, sekä sitä, miten kyseiset aiheet otetaan seksuaalikasvatuksessa huomioon. Myös aiheiden käsittelyn tärkeyttä on pohdittu.

Avainsanat: seksuaalikasvatus, sukupuoli, seksuaalisuus, monikulttuurisuus, seksuaalinen häirintä, yhteiskunnan seksualisoituminen

This Bachelor's thesis is about sexuality education in Finland and current topics relating to sexuality education and the challenges these topics present.

Sexuality education, encompassed in health education, is an important subject, since the objective of it is to provide pupils with tools to take care of not only their own health but to function in society respecting each other. Sexuality education is a part of the Finnish curriculum, meaning that it will reach everyone still in compulsory education. Sexuality education is taught during all grades, integrated to different subjects depending on the age of the pupils.

This Bachelor's thesis presents the different stages of the development of sexuality education in Finland, and how sexuality education is executed. This literature review also discusses current topics in relation to sexuality (questions relating to gender, the diversity of sexualities, increasing cultural diversity, sexual misconduct and harassment, and the sexualization of society), and explores how they and the possible challenges they create are considered in sexuality education in Finland. Also, the importance of acknowledging these topics is discussed.

Keywords: sexuality education, gender, sexuality, sexual misconduct, multiculturalism, sexualization of the society

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## 1 Introduction

The aim of this bachelor's thesis is to discuss how some topical perspectives, that I will later introduce, are explored in sexuality education in Finland, and what challenges they might present. Sexuality is an integral part of a person's life. A healthy relationship with sexuality is an important aspect of overall well-being, and the struggles with sexuality can also be a reason of turmoil, especially during adolescence. This is why it is important through sexuality education to provide a safe environment for pupils to discuss their concerns and questions surrounding the subject. Loeber et al (2010) use the World Health Organisation's definition of sexuality as a multifaceted aspect of human being, including biological aspects, such as sex and reproduction, but also emotional and social ones, such as gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, pleasure and intimacy. The definition also recognizes the different expressions and experiences of sexuality, such as fantasies, beliefs, behaviours and practices, and acknowledges also how sexuality is influenced by the interaction many factors alongside the biological, social and emotional, such as the economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors (p.170).

When examined from a general point of view, the World Health Organization continues to define sexuality education as something that should begin already early in childhood and progress, thereafter, gradually equipping pupils with knowledge, positive values and skills to not only understand but enjoy their sexuality. The definition also encompasses the different aspects that sexuality consists of; the cognitive, emotional, social, interactive and physical. The main aim of sexuality education for children and young people is to protect and support sexual development, and also to ensure that young people have the information and skills required to have responsibility over their own (and others') sexual health and well-being, and to be able to have safe and fulfilling relationships (Maaailman terveystieteiden tutkimuskeskus (WHO) Euroopan aluetoimisto, BZgA, 2010, p.16).

Sufficient sexuality education is important for a number of reasons. For one, the before mentioned importance of sexuality to an individual's life should be incentive enough to provide comprehensive and sufficient sexual education. The benefits of sexuality education can be seen by exploring various studies from several European countries that show how

through long-term national sexuality education programmes teenage pregnancy, abortion and STI- rates have declined (Parker et al, 2009, p.229-231).

Despite research suggesting that appropriate and well-executed sexuality education indeed is an important factor in the overall health statistics of a nation, it is sometimes overlooked in education. Epstein et al (2003) address this by stating that young people are often expected to learn complex and intricate issues in literature, science and history, and “yet walk out of a sexuality education lesson with no more knowledge about the great contributions of great 20th century thinkers on sexuality than they had when they went in.” (p.67).

In an ever- changing world, sexuality education is presented with new challenges to overcome, and it would be worth evaluating how to improve the existing structures to better accommodate these changes. That is why I personally see it as productive to look into what these changes and challenges might be, and how they could be discussed in an educational setting while also discussing in short about their importance to the sexual health of an individual.

The exploration of these aspects has led me to create my two research questions:

1. What kind of current challenges are presented in sexuality education within the Finnish educational context?
2. How are said challenges addressed in classrooms and sexuality education executed in Finland?

As my research questions are very tightly intertwined and in relation to each other, I will explore and discuss both of them intertwined throughout this thesis, and they will not be addressed in separate chapters. Instead, this thesis is structured by exploring five different aspects related to sexuality education: gender, different sexualities, sexual misconduct and harassment, multiculturalism, and the sexualization of the society. I have chosen these specific topics for a couple of reasons. Firstly, as I was looking into literature about this topic in preparation to write my thesis, I noticed some of the topics mentioned multiple times. The World Health Organisation (2010) states how recent developments have generated a “new need” for sexuality education. These developments are, according to WHO, globalization and immigration from different cultures and backgrounds, the rapid spread of the media, especially the internet and mobile technology, increasing worry about sexual exploitation of

children, and finally, the changing attitudes towards sexuality (p.7). Many guides and reports, such as the Guide to Advance Sexual and Reproductive Health by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö, 2007, p.37) and a similar guide by the National Institute for Health and Welfare (Klemetti, Raussi- Lehto, 2016, p.16) mentioned the increasing diversity of cultures in classes as a challenge, as well as something to pay attention to in sex education, as cultures view sex and sexuality in many different ways.

Secondly, many of the chosen themes have been discussed publicly within the recent years and have been divisive to the opinions of the general public. These conversations are, for example relating to gender and the disgruntlement towards the supposed gender neutrality of the revised 2014 curriculum (Liimatainen, 2016), and the public outcry to change the law regarding transgender people transitioning (Amnesty International, 2017). Sexual misconduct has also been the topic of global conversation with the rise of the #metoo and #timesup campaigns (Kingston, 2018). Sexual harassment in schools in Finland was very recently brought up, since last autumn some fairly disturbing results were uncovered about sexual harassment in middle schools in a study made by YLE MOT (Munukka, Kurki, 2018). The results of this study lead me to believe, that looking into the prevention of sexual harassment as a part of sexuality education would be purposeful.

I will now briefly define some of the important and repeated terms I have decided to use throughout this thesis to ensure clarity and coherence.

- sex education/sexuality education. Sex education is often referred to sexuality or sexual education. I have decided to use the term “sexuality education”, as I feel as though it best represents the Finnish context of this thesis and is the best translation of the Finnish term “seksuaalikasvatus”. I also agree with Rantajääskö (2013), who in her masters’ thesis argues that this would be a better term to use in a classroom setting for its inclusiveness of all the aspects of sexuality, not only the anatomical facts (p. 3).
- queer. Throughout this thesis I refer to people and pupils identifying with various gender and sexual identities. I have decided to use the term “queer” to describe non-heterosexual and LGBTQ+ ways of identifying. As Epstein et al (2003) mention in their study, I too understand the abusive history that the word carries, but feel as though it is the most inclusive and convenient word to use, as I try not to accidentally exclude any identities and want to remain as inclusive as possible (p. 8).



- sexual misconduct/sexual harassment. I use these two terms, particularly in the chapter discussing the topic. I have decided to include both ways of describing the phenomena in question, respective to the sources and the terms they have used.

This bachelor's thesis is a literature review, and it investigates reports, guides, studies and teachers' materials on sexuality education, both from a broader point of view as well as more specifically in the context of Finland. The aim is to offer an overview on how different topics are perceived and taken into account in sex education, as well as discuss the development of the history of sexuality education in Finland.

## **2 Sexuality education in Finnish schools/Finland**

Sexuality education in Finland has had its ups and downs. Sexuality education became obligatory in 1970, and municipalities have provided free contraception counseling since 1972. In the mid-1990s the rates of abortion within adolescents declined to low levels, which can be seen as an indicator of improving sexual health amongst young people. However, over the next seven years the abortion rates increased by 50%, after the quality and quantity of sex education both worsened when sex education was made an optional subject (Loeber et al, 2010, p.173). Sexuality education regained its mandatory status in 2001 for some grades (Parker et al, 2009, p.234).

Sexuality education is usually executed as a part of health education, which was introduced to the curriculum in 2004 and was made obligatory in 2006. This subject encompasses sexuality education for middle schoolers (pupils aged 13-15) and includes human relations, sexuality, behaviour, values and norms. For younger pupils (aged 7-12), sexuality education is integrated into environmental and natural studies (Loeber et al, 2010, p.173). It should be noted that the educational content might vary a little depending on in which class it is taught. For example, if sex education is taught in a biology class, the emphasis tends to be on the physical and reproductive aspects. If sex education is discussed in another class, for example in ethics class or health education, the emphasis might be on social, moral and human interaction (Maaailman terveystieteiden (WHO) Euroopan aluetoimisto, BZgA, 2010, p.12).

The importance of the curriculum and therefore compulsory education containing sex education should not be overlooked. Sex education as a part of compulsory education is integral in promoting sexual- and reproductive health, because of its unique reach of all children and young people (Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö, 2007, p.37). Even though the importance of sexuality education as a part of the curriculum is recognized on a theoretical level, many studies show that Finnish young people state that their most important source of information relating to questions about sexuality are their friends. Other important sources were the television and magazines, and only after those were teachers and the school nurse mentioned (Liinamo, 2000, p. 229). However, it should be noted that it is possible this has changed since this study was conducted, and nowadays the internet is most likely regarded to be the most important source, and Klemetti and Raussi-Lehto (2016) argue that the internet

does play an essential part in sexuality education (p.53). Many pupils have also expressed their concerns about the inadequacy of their received sex education. Studies show that the quantity of sexuality education was regarded as insufficient, with at least half of the participants of said a study stating that they had hoped for more (Liinamo, 2000, p. 226). Many pupils mentioned how sexuality should be already addressed already in primary school, with almost a quarter of the sampling of 6th graders in this study who wished for sex education to start before 5th grade (Kontula, Lottes, 2000, p. 223).

Overall, the attitudes towards sex education in Finland are positive. Both young people and their parents, as well as the providers of sex education perceive school- provided sexuality education as important and necessary (Liinamo, 2000, p. 221). This information seems to be somewhat in conflict with previously mentioned information; if the importance of sexuality education is recognized by all parties, what causes the dissatisfaction within the recipients of the education?

According to Lähdesmäki and Peltonen (2000), the problem is not in the curriculum. They state that the national curriculum has indeed provided a framework that would allow well-executed sexuality education for almost 30 years. This, however, is not translated in practice in schools, and various reports indicate that outcomes of sexuality education remain inconsistent (p. 215).

The content of Finnish sex education has also been under some criticism. Multiple studies show that the teaching of sex education concentrates on birth prevention, relationships (namely dating), and sexually transmitted diseases/infections, and recently Helsingin Sanomat published an article about how the Finnish sexuality education is based on “scaring” the pupils with STD’s and unwanted pregnancies (Vanhatalo, 2019). This places unnecessary emphasis on risks and leaves many other dimensions of sexuality unexplored. The same themes are repeatedly covered on different grade- levels, while many desired topics are not mentioned. Liinamo (2000) refers to earlier studies by Nykänen and Sironen (1996) and Kontula (1991) in which young people have expressed their interest to discussing topics such as feelings and their effect to sexuality and relationships, masturbation and sexual minorities. Young people are also left feeling that the subjects covered in sex education class are addressed without enough depth (p. 227). This would seem that the issue is not actually with the quantity of sex education, but more with the execution and quality of it. The Finnish

curriculum is praised for the freedom it leaves for the teachers, but sometimes this can lead to great disparities between schools in certain subjects, as it seems to have happened with sex education in the mid-1990s (Cacciatore et al, 2001, p.7).

Schools are regarded as one of the most important sources for pupils to receive help and assistance regarding questions about sexuality. In national guides schools have been appointed with the primary responsibility of answering these questions (Stakes 2002, STM 2006 as cited by Sosiaali ja terveystministeriö, 2007, p.31). This is important not only because of the aforementioned fact that this guidance is available for all young people in compulsory education, but also because as a part of the education system, the information is equally within the reach of both girls and boys alike, and is not only geared to one of the binary genders (Sosiaali- ja terveystministeriö, 2007, p.31).

### 3 Perspectives of sex education based on current public debates

#### 3.1 Questions relating to gender in sexuality education

In this chapter I will discuss how gender is taken into account in sexuality education in Finland, as well as why this is done and seen as important. The term gender is often used as synonymous with the word “sex”, meaning the biological characteristics that make a person male or female (Maailman terveystajärjestö (WHO), 2010, p.16). Gender, as defined by the World Health Organisation, means the characteristics, roles and norms that are socially constructed and assigned to women and men (World Health Organisation). Leaning onto these definitions, I will be using the term “gender” from now on, as this chapter will mostly be discussing the social context of gender instead of the anatomical/biological.

Gender is an important concept both within sex education as well as the everyday life of pupils. Having an understanding of how gender affects hierarchies, power dynamics and relationships within an educational setting is important, as the society defines masculinities and femininities as better or worse than the other, and the power dynamics of gender and sexuality are a part of every school day (Lehtonen, 2003, p.134). Gender is also visible within the content of sex education, and Klemetti and Raussi-Lehto (2016) state that already in early childhood education sexuality education should include the deliberation and reflection of gender roles (p.47).

Recently, as the curriculum was revised in 2014, it was met with some backlash over supposedly requiring teachers to use gender neutral language, and not allowing teachers to use the terms “girls” or “boys” (Liimatainen, 2016). However, the public debate seemed to be misinformed. In reality, the gender neutrality was encouraged in the 2004 edition of a guide for gender equality in education, by the ministry of education, called *Tasa-arvotyö on taitolaji*. As this guide was also revised in 2015, this new edition actually replaced gender neutrality with the term “*sukupuolittietoinen*”- gender aware. The guide states how criticism was made towards how the gender neutrality might actually emphasize the inherent differences between the binary gender (Jääskeläinen et al, 2015, p.18). In actuality, the aim of gender awareness is to decrease unnecessarily referring to pupils primarily as a representative of their gender (Liimatainen, 2016). According to Tainio (2009), when teachers refer to pupils

as a group based on gender, they will inevitably, yet unintentionally build the cultural categories girls and boys are often placed into; for example, girls are quiet, and boys are rebellious (p.162).

The aim for these changes in educational settings was not to ignore the gender binary or deny the right to identify within it, but instead to be aware that there are cultural and societal structures in place that define what it means to be a boy or a girl, and how these structures affect individuals based on their gender. If gender neutrality is the aim, these structures might go unnoticed and their effect on the lives of individuals disregarded, which is counterproductive towards the cause (Jääskeläinen et al, 2015, p.67-68). The acknowledgement of said structures also allows conversation about other gender identities and their existence, as Jääskeläinen et al go to argue that the objective of gender aware education is to dismantle said structures.

Having these discussions in class is important, as it provides children and young people with the opportunity to understand and be a part of larger conversations concerning these topics. For example, recently the Finnish law concerning transgender people and their transition has been brought up and criticized, as Finland is the last Nordic country to require sterilization in order to allow transitioning (Amnesty International, 2017). This has been hugely criticized by many agents, probably most notably by Amnesty International, who state that this requirement is a violation of human rights, more specifically the right to self-determination, of transgender people (Amnesty International, 2017).

Understanding gender and the ways it affects the mundane reality of one's everyday life is important, since the effect can be hard to detect, but is ever-present and pervasive (Epstein et al, 2003, p.71). Gender can be a source of confusion and concern for pupils, as it can be difficult to balance between the unwritten norms that are required to be fulfilled in different contexts. Especially difficult is if these norms conflict with each other, and pupils can face very differing expectations from different social relationships (Manninen, 2010, p.32).

The effect of gender to the everyday life can be seen for example through Lahelma (2014), who whilst writing about two prominent gender discourses in educational settings, the "boy discourse" and the "gender equality discourse" defines gender awareness in more detail, stating how it encompasses "consciousness of social and cultural differences, inequalities and

otherness, all of which are built into educational practices, as well as a belief that these practices can be changed.” She also notes, how it is important to understand the intersectionality of gender; how other ways of identifying, such as age, health, culture and ethnicity affect the performance of gender (p.185). These discourses are present in the everyday lives of pupils and affect their learning environment. The “boy discourse” refers to boys underachieving in education when compared to girls and the concern this underachievement generates, even though this has been known for a long time and “does not destabilise the power position of men in a society.” (Lahelma, 2015, p.175). The “gender equality discourse”, on the other hand, focuses more on the position of girls and women, and is based on international declarations and plans (Lahelma, 2015, p.171).

Sex education has the opportunity to either support or dismantle the traditional gender roles, and the intention to remain neutral by opting for biological or anatomical approaches does not actually guarantee inclusion or neutrality. As Lehtonen (2003) argues, even the clinical description of reproduction tends to reinforce the traditional gender binary by the way it describes the fertilization; the sperm cell is active in searching for the egg, and the egg is described as the target (p.57).

It is also worthy to notice how gender is present within the sex education classroom but separate from the content of the teaching. For example, a questionnaire conducted by Väestöliitto in 2000 and 2006 goes to show, that boys’ knowledge of sexual and reproductive health is not at the same level than that of their peer girls’ (Klemetti, Raussi-Lehto, 2016, p.28). Kontula (2010) also discusses this by arguing how improving boys’ knowledge on sexuality and providing especially boys quality sexuality education is important, because girls are more likely to have other alternative sources of relevant information when it comes to sexuality issues (p.385).

The understanding of gender is not always as straightforward as one would expect. For example, Butler (1993) notes how the significance of gender is temporary and highly bound to the context and circumstances (as cited in Manninen, 2010, p.33). The way in which we understand gender is changing, and many researchers, such as Lehtonen (2012) have been vocal about how the definition of gender based on biology is too narrow, and in addition to biology and anatomy, both the psychological and social aspects should be considered in the definition of gender. He also acknowledges that some individuals, some transgender or

intersex people, for example, have both male and female characteristics and may wish to be left out of the gender binary (as cited in Bildjuschkin, 2015, p.10).

### **3.2 The diversity of sexualities**

One would think that in a class called sex education, or even sexuality education, sexual orientations would be quite a prominent topic. However, the many dimensions of sexuality often go unexplored in formal education, due to the biological and clinical way sex education is presented, which leads to a very unilateral and heteronormative outlook on sexuality (Lehtonen, 2003, p.58). Some upper secondary schools do provide optional courses on sexual diversity, but the responsibility of the execution of those courses often falls on individual teachers (Kjaraan, J. I., 2018). This lack of information is contradictory to the demand, because as Liinamo (2000) stated, and as I already mentioned before, pupils have already in the early 2000s expressed their interest to explore the theme of different sexualities and sexual minorities in sexuality education (p.227). Sex education fosters a very heteronormative, or even heterosexist worldview, which can be seen for example in the way sexuality is addressed; sexual orientation is mostly brought up as homosexuality, which is presented as “different”. Heterosexuality, on the other hand, might not even be mentioned, as it is seen to be obvious (Lehtonen, 2003, p.77). Vanhatalo (2019), in her article for Helsingin Sanomat, states how all the professionals interviewed for said article agreed that sexuality education should better take into account the diversity of young people’s gender and sexuality.

Heterosexism refers to the often-unconscious discrimination towards queer pupils due to heteronormativity and the acceptance of heterosexuality as the norm (Sunnari et al, 2003, p. 18). Schools are in no way immune to adopting heterosexist attitudes. As a reflection of the general values of the society and maintaining society’s beliefs, schools along with for example the media, religion and academia reinforces a heterosexist culture (Sunnari et al, 2003, p.215). In the educational context this refers to the lack of awareness towards issues queer pupils face, invisibility of queer persons in the school policies and curriculum, and the hostile atmosphere towards non-heterosexuality that make being open about one’s sexuality difficult (Bedford, 2009, p.23).



Even though heterosexism affects queer pupils more deeply, it is not beneficial to heterosexual pupils either, and is, in fact, oppressive towards everyone. Due to heterosexism, pupils face very rigid stereotypical categories of man and woman they are pressured to fit into, no matter how unsuitable they might be perceived to be, and this limits the individuality of all -heterosexual, queer, transgender, girl and boy- pupils (Sunnari et al, 2003, p.216).

Queer pupils have no way to relate, as sexuality education is mostly offered through heterocentric perspectives, which leaves queer pupils less likely to receive comprehensive sexuality education (Gowen, Wings-Yanez, 2014, p. 788). The lack of acknowledgement, however, does not erase the need for support and information in queer pupils, as they especially are likely to foster feelings of confusion and fear when beginning to explore their sexual relationships, since they will not receive the same acceptance from the society as a heterosexual relationship would (Lehtonen, 2006, p.94).

Discussions about the spectrum of sexualities is important to all pupils, not just to those who identify within the LGBTQ community. Already in 2000 in a report by Cacciatore et al (2000) about the knowledge of young people about sexual health it is stated, that if homosexuality was normalized, homophobia would decrease among young boys (p. 82). As our culture pressures young boys to be masculine and not express affection towards other boys or men, boys are deprived of the opportunity to process their own sexualities without the fear of being stigmatized. So, the very natural ways to show love and friendship through actions of affection are perceived as inherently sexual (Bildjuschkin, Malmberg, 2000, p.121). Young boys learn to not show emotions or “weakness” in fear of being labelled “gay” as a result of a homophobic culture (Lehtonen, 2003, p.148). The homophobia which is then curated prevents conversations about the “sensitive sides” of men and masculinities and can also cause feelings of fear and resentment towards their own development (Cacciatore et al, 2000, p.82).

As the focus in sexuality education class is mostly on heterosexual relationships, queer students must venture to the world of dating and sexual relationships with much less knowledge and tools, since the heteronormative information is not always adaptable to, for instance, same-sex relationships (Lehtonen, 2003, p. 60). This increases inequality between the pupils, even if it is invisible in everyday life. Epstein et al (2003) refer to Trudell’s research and state that in addition to failing to meet the needs of queer students, sex education also fails to expand the knowledge base of all pupils (queer and straight alike) in regard to sexuality (p.55).

Even when other sexualities besides heterosexuality are explored, the discussion about sexualities tends to remain somewhat focused on homosexuality as the opposite of the heterosexual relationship, sometimes also bisexuality is mentioned (Lehtonen, 2003, p.33). However, these sexual dichotomies might feed into a very binary understanding of sexuality and limit sexualities into rigid categories. Sunnari et al (2003) also agree with Epstein et al (2003) in that this dichotomization of sexualities is problematic for all the identities on the spectrum of sexualities, since the attempt to constrict all sexualities to fit to a socially constructed spectrum does marginalize the validation of bisexual (and other) identities, but also creates limitations to those who do identify within the existing categories (p.21).

### **3.3 The increasing cultural diversity in classrooms**

Sexuality education has not been studied from a multicultural perspective in Finland with but a few exceptions (Honkasalo, 2013, p.6). Epstein et al (2003) mention how negotiations considering sex and sexuality, and the perception of what is deemed as “appropriate knowledge” for compulsory education greatly varies from country to country. They continue to discuss what are the factors that form this view, and conclude that “these negotiations are partly a result of different formations of ‘left’ and ‘right’, of the relative power of the ‘moral majority’ and a discourse of ‘sexual liberalism’ and the power of religion compared to that of civil/secular society.” (p.4).

In Finland, the emphasis of sex education in a multicultural context seems to be on the effect that religion has on culture and the understanding of sex and sex education. This is understandable, since religion is often a very important part of cultural identity, and in many countries due to religion sexuality is not addressed in education (Sosiaali ja terveystieteiden ministeriö, 2007, p.37).

Being culturally sensitive whilst juggling to provide quality sex education can be a challenge, but it is very important, as different groups are in risk of encountering differing issues. For example, according to Klemetti and Raussi-Lehto (2006), 70% of women of Somalian heritage and 32% of women with a Kurdish background have had female circumcision performed on them. Women with Somalian backgrounds have more miscarriages, and women with Russian backgrounds have more abortions than the national average. Women of African heritage have more issues during their pregnancies and their newborns have more health issues than those of other ethnic groups in Finland. There are also indications that the

knowledge of sexual health is less adequate among young people with immigrant backgrounds as opposed to the average knowledge level of middle schoolers (p.29).

Even though the challenges of immigrants are known, and the young generation exists and experience their daily life in a multicultural environment, this experience does not translate to the material used in Finnish sexuality education. According to Honkasalo (2016), health education text books often present the Finnish understanding of sexuality as well-developed and liberating, but other cultures, especially “Muslim cultures” are presented in a negative light, and these “other cultures” considered to be less developed in terms of sexuality (p.19).

The challenge of multicultural sex education is often discussed merely within the context of immigration. The increase of immigration definitely does pose new challenges, but it should be noted that the challenges wouldn't cease to exist even without the immigration factor. For example, there is a variety of religions and variations of Christianity, the dominant religion in Finland, that have somewhat differing views on sex and sexuality and the various topics they encompass, for example on homosexuality or abortion. These religions are, for example, Jehovah's witnesses and revivalist movements (herätysliikkeet) (Brusila, 2008).

### **3.4 Sexual misconduct and harassment**

Recently sexual misconduct has been a hot topic for public conversation, catalyzed into action by the #metoo movement, in which women have shared their experiences of sexual harassment online (Kingston, 2018). The movement spread into a wider debate about sexual misconduct, and even inspired research on the subject. For example, the YLE MOT found, that many children in middle school experience sexual harassment from their peers (Munukka, Kurki, 2018).

According to Bildjuschkin and Malmberg (2000), schools are not immune to sexual harassment despite the young age of the pupils (p.135), and Jääskeläinen et al (2015) note that sexual harassment in schools might already begin in primary schools. Sexual harassment can take many forms, such as verbal, for example in the form of sexually loaded jokes, or physical, such as unwanted touching. At its core, sexual harassment is unwanted behaviour that invades one's personal space and disrespects the physical integrity (koskemattomuus) of another person (p.14). Sexual harassment has many effects on the pupil, and might jeopardize

the future of the victim of the harassment, as the school attendance is negatively impacted (Larkin (1994) as cited in Sunnari, 2003, p. 127).

Sexual violence as itself is not a new concept within sexuality education and was recognized already in the 1980s. During this period also other aspects of sexuality were recognized, and taboos such as sexual harassment and violence were noticed as something that require preventative action (Maailman terveystajärjestö (WHO), 2010, p.9). However, the topic of sexual harassment in all its forms rarely comes up in sex education class, or is at least overshadowed by other topics, such as STI's or pregnancy prevention (Liinamo, 2000, p.227). The #metoo movement redefined what sexual harassment means, and how it is actually visible on a spectrum, and encompassing all kinds of dubious behavior, such as unwanted touching, stalking, crude jokes, instead of defining sexual harassment only as the most extreme examples of it, such as rape (Kingston, 2018).

As mentioned in the introduction, according to Munukka and Kurki (2018) and the Yle MOT report, pupils in Finland do face sexual harassment in schools, with a lot of said harassment performed by their peers. This was also acknowledged by Cacciatore et al (2000), who state in the report by Väestöliitto, that when discussing sexual misconduct, it should be noted that a lot of the time sexual misconduct is performed by the peers of the pupils (p.86).

The conversation on sexual misconduct is also closely related to other aforementioned perspectives, and it should be noted that the display of sexual misconduct is very gendered and is sometimes presented as just being a part of regular development of young people (Lehtonen, 2003, p.166). Girls and boys often face different types of harassment, with girls being more likely to face physical harassment (Jääskeläinen et al, 2015, p.15). Girls are often also compared to each other, which is also a part of reinforcing heteronormativity, as the comparison is often based on "the normative ideal of presenting heterosexual sexuality." (Sunnari, 2003, p.133). Sexual harassment can also be a part of asserting one's own place in the hierarchy of the class, and Huuki (2010) notices how by performing or discussing forbidden, silenced or taboo subjects, boys of a higher status created trends that reconstructed their idea of masculinity (p.87). Unfortunately, this can sometimes mean that one of these performances of asserting dominance is the sexual harassment of girls (Huuki, 2010, p.88). Boys, especially boys of a high status, seemed to have a significant role in determining which

characteristics were deemed as secondary, and these were often feminine traits and non-heterosexuality (Huuki, 2010, p.86).

Boys are of course not always the perpetrators, and are, in fact, in more of a risk than their peer girls of facing more verbal abuse if not presenting to be masculine enough (Lehtonen, 2003, p.153). It is also common, especially among boys, to use “gay” as synonymous with insults, even when it is not used to target anyone’s sexuality per se (Lehtonen, 2003, 160). As harassment between boys is often based on humor, boys are often in danger of having the harassment they face, especially from other boys, become a part of the “boys will be boys”-discourse (Huuki, 2010, p.86). However, young people who are a part of sexual and gender minorities, such as gay, bi or transgendered pupils are more likely than any other pupils to face harassment in schools (Jääskeläinen et al, 2015, p.15).

The prevention of sexual harassment is made difficult, considering the way that the heteronormative culture tends to normalize harassment from a very early age (e.g. “he’s just being mean because he likes you”). Lehtonen (2003) reflects on how boys’ bullying towards girls is often interpreted to be a sign of interest, merely an innocent yet clumsy attempt of expressing heterosexual attraction that should be perceived as flattering if not a little annoying (p.256). Legislation has prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender (or discrimination based on the correction of one’s gender) for years, but it is rare for schools to actively prevent possible discrimination or misconduct (Lehtonen, 2015, p.108).

### **3.5 Sexualization of the society**

The increasing sexualization of the society and the sexual content in the media poses new challenges for the Finnish sex education. Before taboo and silenced topics of sexuality are becoming more mundane and common, making sexuality a very culturally current topic (Huuki, 2010, p.88). Sexualized content is accessible everywhere, and the movie industry, alongside other media, molds young people’s understanding of sex and sexuality (Lähdesmäki, Peltonen, 2000, p. 216). Katsulis et al (2013) argue that sexualization is mostly to be blamed on the commodification of sexuality via popular media, advertising and pornography (p.4). According to studies conducted in America (Brown 2002, Ward 2003), young people who are repeatedly exposed to sexual content through media tend to have more stereotypical and shallow attitudes towards sex, as well as overly high expectations regarding

the sexual activity of their peers (as cited by Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö, 2007, p.37). Katsulis et al (2013) refer to Gill (2007) in stating how the power of the media is in subtle in the ways it influences its consumers as opposed to crude manipulation, and how popular media reinforces stereotypical and gendered views on sexuality (p. 2).

The media and the accessibility of information it provides is not all bad. For example, pupils can independently look for materials, and within the world of the internet, good and versatile materials concerning sex and sexuality can be easily found (Lähdesmäki, Peltonen, 2000, p.216). Klemetti and Raussi- Lehto (2016) weigh in on this by noticing the importance of the internet and the information available and the many websites which aim to provide information and the opportunity to ask questions directly from professionals (p.53). The internet might provide a space for positive impact on, for example, the sexual development, sexual self-determination and sexual self-expression of young people (Katsulis et al, 2013, p.7). However, they also go to acknowledge how the internet is a tool to carry out harassment and sexual violence (Klemetti, Raussi-Lehto, 2016, p.53). This poses a challenge, as it is difficult for educators or parents/caregivers to regulate the content young people are viewing. Young people, who receive most of their information in regard to sexuality through violent sexual material, are the most vulnerable (Lähdesmäki, Peltonen, 2000, p.216).

It is important to understand how the society is sexualized, as sexuality is presented and performed outside of class and in the everyday life of young people and adults alike, and how the abundant and ever-present discourse of heterosexuality is used by children as a tool in decision making (Epstein et al, 2003, p.16). It should be noted that these discourses are at least in part due to, as Epstein et al go to argue, how there is a “narrowly defined way of being” that is presented, promoted and policed in the education system, and that way is heterosexual and monogamous (p.141). It is important to be aware of the ways culture emphasizes the heterosexual relationship and relate it to normality, and also of the fact how much these values are translated into education, especially since in Finland, the guide for gender equality does state that education should aim to recognize and dismantle the societal and cultural structure (Jääskeläinen et al, 2015, p.18). It should be noted how intersectionality intertwines with the sexualization of the society, and portrayals of, in this case, girls’ sexuality is highly not only gendered, but also racialized and classed (Katsulis et al, 2013, p.3). Sexualization of the society also affects how sexuality is related to one’s identity, and

Huuki (2010), for example, notes how the resource of sexuality has also become a part of self-defining masculinity (p.88).

The more sex and sexuality are addressed within the society, the more difficult it gets to distinguish what kind of public discussion is appropriate. It might seem that publicly having an opinion and publicly discussing about anyone's sexuality or sex life is acceptable, since sex is so pervasive in the media and society (Bildjuschkin, Malmberg, 2000, p.135). This might make identifying inappropriate behavior and even harassment even more difficult.

Sexualisation of the society has not been researched a lot, especially in the Finnish context. Many sources, for example Maailman terveystilasto (WHO) Euroopan aluetilasto and BZgA (2010) refer to history, and how in the beginning of the 2000s "the sexualization of the media" was considered concerning and as something that has a negative impact on young people and needs addressing (p.9). Lähdesmäki, Peltonen (2000) argued already almost 20 years ago how it is important to include media training more prominently in sex education (p.216). This is backed up by Klemetti and Raussi-Lehto (2016), who state that media education should be a part of sexuality education, as the media shapes the perception of sexuality and the expectations towards themselves and their peers (p.40). Katsulis et al (2013) go even further, suggesting that a level of activism should be involved in media literacy education to ensure that the prevalent media images that serve to maintain social inequalities related to gender, race and sexual orientation can be noticed and combatted (p.8).

## 4 Discussion and conclusion

In this thesis I attempted to answer the following two questions.

1. What kind of current challenges are presented in sexuality education within the Finnish educational context?
2. How are said challenges addressed in classrooms and sexuality education executed in Finland?

First, I hoped to provide an overview of the historical development of sexuality education in Finland, examining briefly the stages of how sexuality education gained its mandatory status in 2001 (Parker et al, 2009, p.234), and how it is executed today as integrated in various subjects, such as health education or environmental studies, depending on the grade and age of the pupils (Loeber et al, 2010, p.173). I also discussed the importance of having sexuality education as a part of compulsory education (Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö, 2007, p.37), the content and amount of sex education and the criticism towards it (Liinamo, 2000, p. 226), as well as the overall attitude towards sexuality education in Finland, that tends to be positive (Liinamo, 2000, p. 221).

Next, I took a closer look into five different themes or perspectives of sex education, gender, the diversity of sexualities, increasing cultural diversity in classrooms, sexual misconduct, and sexualization of the society. It should be noted, that this is not an exclusive list of current themes and topics within sexuality education, and as sexuality education does encompass many ethically charged and even intimate topics, this list should not be regarded as definitive. I decided on these topics based on the literature I read in preparation to write this thesis, and personally find these topics important and topical. I wished to look if these topics were addressed in sexuality education in Finland, while also gaining on understanding the importance of these themes on a more general level, and why they are important topics in sexuality education.

Firstly, I addressed the importance of understanding gender within the context of sexuality education. Gender affects one's everyday life significantly (Lehtonen, 2003, p.134). As the dismantling of gender roles and stereotypes is mentioned to be an objective of education for equality in various educational guides (Jääskeläinen et al, 2015, p.67-68), and the notion that sexuality education has the opportunity to either reinforce or dissemble stereotypes



(Lehtonen, 2003, p.57), there is reason to believe this is an important topic to be brought up in sexuality education. The topic of gender in the educational has also been actively publicly debated recently (Liimatainen, 2016; Jääskeläinen et al, 2015, p.18), which lead me to briefly discuss both the educational context of gender (Lahelma, 2015) as well as the societal context of gender (Amnesty International, 2017). I decided to include these perspectives in my thesis even though they may stray from my topic and context of sexuality education, since the significance of understanding gender is integral to the other perspectives in this thesis, as well as education as a whole.

Next, I discussed how the diversity of sexualities is explored in sexuality education. Even though sexual diversity was mentioned to be one of the subjects that interest young people (Liinamo, 2000, p.227), the reality was that sexuality is often explored in shallow ways in formal sexuality education, dichotomizing gay and straight as opposites, and disregarding other ways of identification (Lehtonen, 2003, p.33). I believe that this discourse can alienate pupils who do not feel like they fit into this assumption and exclude other sexualities besides the straight/gay dichotomy, such as asexuality. Openness about different sexualities and their normalization might alleviate the anxiety regarding sexuality, even if one's specific sexual orientation is not directly addressed in class and knowing that sexuality exist on a spectrum and there are countless of ways to relate to said spectrum might be enough. This might be a worthy topic for future research.

I also mentioned heterosexism and its oppressive nature towards everyone regardless of sexuality and the troubles queer pupils face in the educational setting (Sunnari et al, 2003; Bedford, 2009), as I feel as though quality sexuality education would have the potential to dismantle these structures that prevail. As Bedford (2009) states, research on the effects and causes of heterosexism and homophobia exists and is somewhat common, little research has been made on teacher education interventions to challenge them (p.213). He also argues that critical theory, - in which social reality is regarded to be constructed by social, political, economic and cultural values – when applied to the social constructions of homophobia and heterosexism could be deconstructed through desocialisation (p.49). This theory also challenges the passivity through which these phenomena are often viewed as a part of “some natural and inevitable order” and so, accepted (p.50).

The increase of cultural diversity, mostly viewed through the lens of immigration (Klemetti, Raussi- Lehto, 2016, p.16) and the diversity of religions that are presented with it (Sosiaali ja

terveysministeriö, 2007, p.37), was mentioned in many guides as a challenge to the sexuality education in Finland. Interestingly, as many of these sources regard the increasing cultural diversity as a challenge, not a lot of solutions or materials are offered, and a lot of research has not been made on multiculturalism and sexuality education, despite reports showing that especially immigrant girls would require extra attention (Honkasalo, 2016, p.7). However, diversity should be acknowledged to be existing even outside the context of immigration, as Brusila (2008) notes, reminding that the Finnish society has, for example, always dealt with various forms of Christianity, like Jehovah's witnesses and revivalist movements. There are many angles that this topic could be further researched, since, as stated before, a lot of research has not been done on this topic. I personally would find it interesting to see how different schools have different challenges regarding cultural diversity and sexuality education, as some areas might have bigger populations of certain religious movements (e.g. Jehova's witnesses), and other areas might have more immigrants, and if this distribution caters to the inconsistent outcomes in regard to sexuality education that Lähdesmäki and Peltonen (2000) refer to (p. 215). As cultures vary greatly in how they perceive sexuality and might have different expectations as to who the responsibility of sexuality education falls on, this might translate to parents placing pressure on the schools and teachers about the sexuality education of their children. More research on the subject on multicultural sexuality education in general, as well as the way teachers (or teacher students) experience the pressure of varying expectations could be something worthy of studying.

I then went on to discuss sexual misconduct and harassment, prompted by recent public phenomena, such as the #metoo- campaign. Sexual harassment is the unfortunate reality to many young people in Finnish schools (Munukka and Kurki, 2018), and even more so for queer pupils (Jääskeläinen et al, 2015, p.15). Girls and boys face different kinds of harassment (Sunnari, 2003, p.133; Lehtonen, 2003, p.153), and often some forms of harassment are so normalized that they go unnoticed (Lehtonen, 2003, p.256; Huuki, 2010, p.86). I also briefly touched this subject within the context of sexualization of the society, and how the development of technology and the pervasive nature of the internet creates challenges in relevance to sexual harassment.

Finally, I discussed sexualization of the society. According to Maailman terveysjärjestön (WHO) Euroopan aluetoimisto and BZgA (2010) the sexualization of the media has been considered to be concerning since the early 2000s (p.9). The fact that sexual content has an

impact on the way young people view sexuality was noticed already in 2000 (Lähdesmäki, Peltonen, 2000, p. 216; Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö, 2007, p.37). Both the negatives and positive effects of sexual content in the media were discussed; young people have the ability to find good quality materials for sexuality education, and can contact professional if they so wish (Klemetti, Raussi-Lehto, 2016, p.53), but on the other hand violent and dehumanising content is also available, and the regulation of what young people are consuming is difficult (Lähdesmäki, Peltonen, 2000, p.216; Klemetti, Raussi-Lehto, 2016, p.53). As stated before, a lot of research on this topic, especially in the Finnish context has not been conducted. As media develops rapidly, creating new platforms for sharing and creating information, I personally would see further research on this subject as purposeful and necessary. Especially as technology develops and social media plays a big part in the communication of young people, the impact of the use of social media and the way sexuality is performed (e.g. the role of social media in finding peer support, being exposed to overtly sexual content at a young age) by young people could have, I believe, an opportunity to create a better sexuality education framework.

Furthermore, as sexual harassment has taken new forms as technology advances, and sexual harassment on the internet and in social media has become more and more common (Porras, 2015, p.123), including sexual harassment in the sexuality education curriculum is important to ensure the safety of children and young people. Teacher students, in my opinion, should also receive media training on the subject of sexual harassment. Klemetti and Raussi-Lehto (2016) state that media education should be a part of sexuality education, as the media shapes the perception of sexuality and the expectations towards themselves and their peers (p.40). Thus, I would argue that this is a worthy topic for future research, as I struggled to find recent research made on this subject, especially in the Finnish context.

This thesis does have some restrictions, of course. Firstly, as I mentioned before, the aspects I chose to discuss in this thesis are only a few from an array of topics and issues encompassed in sexuality education worthy of research and discussion, like, for example disability in sexuality education, that is often disregarded (Lehtonen, 2015, p.107). Secondly, I do realize many of the sources date a while back, with the oldest being from the early 2000s. In a fast-developing field, such as gender studies, this might seem like a very long time. However, I have a reason to believe these sources remain valid in this context, as many of the more recent sources I have read and even used in this thesis referenced the same studies or studies similar to them from a similar time period, with most agreeing with them, verifying the arguments of

the original sources. This being said, it should be kept in mind that some of the sources do, in fact, date back to almost 20 years, meaning that even if development is slow, it is probable that some has been made, nevertheless.

In addition to academic sources, I have also used various guides, reports and teachers' materials, as well as some articles from news outlets as the sources to this thesis. This is intentional, and it has been necessary to do so to find comprehensive and satisfying answers to my research questions, as well as to, for example, demonstrate the public discussions surrounding the topics of my thesis.

I have tried to remain as neutral as possible throughout this thesis and offer an overview of how sexuality education is executed in Finland, both from a more broad and general point of view, as well as topic- specifically. However, the subject of sexuality education is somewhat divisive, as many debatable topics are encompassed in it. This means that in my thesis, even if it is subconsciously, my personal stance on sexuality education, its importance and the need for inclusiveness might show.

There are many ways further research could be conducted, and I believe that sexuality education is an important topic to be researched for many reasons, such as, for example, the decreasing knowledge of sexual health among young people, that, according to Klemetti and Raussi-Lehto (2016), is one of the areas needing special development in relation to progressing the overall sexual and reproductive health in Finland (p.17). I have earlier stated a few worthy topics for further research, such as social media use and media training in the context of sexuality education or the experiences of sexuality education of immigrant pupils.

Another important perspective for future research is the teacher's perspective. Could the reason that the curriculum and the various guides for educators are not implemented in ways that are productive lie in the teacher training system? As a teacher student, we have not received a lot of tools they might feel unequipped or even afraid to teach about sexuality (Epstein et al, 2003, p. 34). During multidisciplinary education, we had two courses on the pedagogy of environmental studies, and health education, which sexuality education is a part of, was encompassed in one of them, and was only discussed during one lecture. I feel like this might translate in to teachers feeling unprepared and incompetent to face the daunting subject of sexuality within a classroom, and classroom teachers opt out of teaching sexuality education if possible. I would suspect that teacher students would willingly seek out specific minors, such as the health education minor, and often sexuality education is conducted by the

physical education and/or health education teacher. However, since it would be beneficial to introduce sexuality education to pupils already from a young age and should be integrated to environmental studies in primary school (Loeber et al, 2010, p.173), it would be purposeful to equip teacher students with tools to provide quality sexuality education. Thus, I would argue that the experiences of teacher students' willingness to execute sexuality education would also be a worthy research topic for the future.

In conclusion, I believe that sexuality education in Finland has the potential and opportunity to provide an open-minded, inclusive and comprehensive knowledge and skills to the pupils in compulsory education, which is why I decided to write my thesis about this subject. As a topic that is so clearly related to one's health and wellbeing, as well as it being an important part of interaction and the society, I perceive giving sexuality education recognition and trying to understand it better as important. My aim is to carry these themes throughout the rest of my education and study them further, for example in my master's thesis.

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